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NEW ORLEANS

SPIES

A former CIA chief, an ex-KGB agent, a Watergate burglar and an expert on international espionage got together but the meeting was anything but secret.

The four men discussed the achievements and the dangers of the CIA during a forum Sunday at Tulane University.

Former agency director William Colby and Watergate burglar G. Gordon Liddy spoke in defense of covert operations, while author David Wise characterized such goings-on as ominous.

Vladimir Sakharov added to the picture with memories of his KGB days.

Colby said the agency was not an "evil empire." It was founded, he said, to be "more ruthless than its enemies," but its abuses had been few and far between.

The former director insisted the CIA does not engage in assassinating enemy leaders -- though in the case of Cuba's Fidel Castro it was not "for lack of trying."

Liddy, former general counsel to Richard Nixon's Committee to Re-elect the President, said the end sometimes justified the means when it came to U.S. agents breaking the law.

"Spying is the oldest or at least the second oldest profession," said Liddy.

Sakharov, a former agent for the Soviet intelligence department who later worked for the CIA, said the difference between the two was a matter of method.

The CIA is a think tank while the KGB spends most of its time setting up communications, said Sakharov, who worked at the heart of the agency's operations in the Middle East.

He warned the greatest danger to the United States was the computerization of information. If he were still in the KGB, he said, he would open up a car dealership that would allow him access to financial data on hundreds of people.

Wise, author of "The Invisible Government," said spying was necessary but its abuses should be curtailed. He said Watergate was the prime example of how the mechanics of espionage could be used for political purposes.

"This is 1984," he warned.